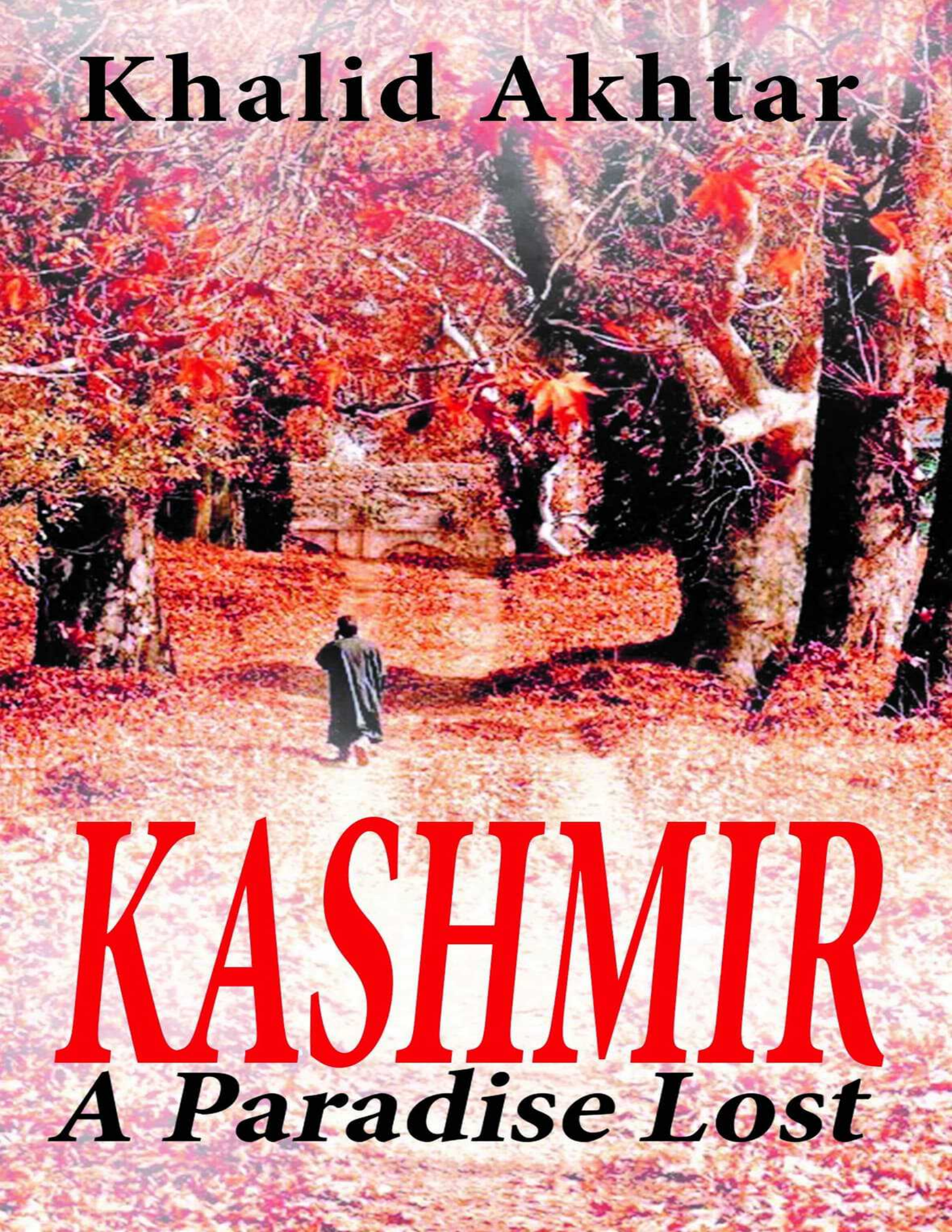
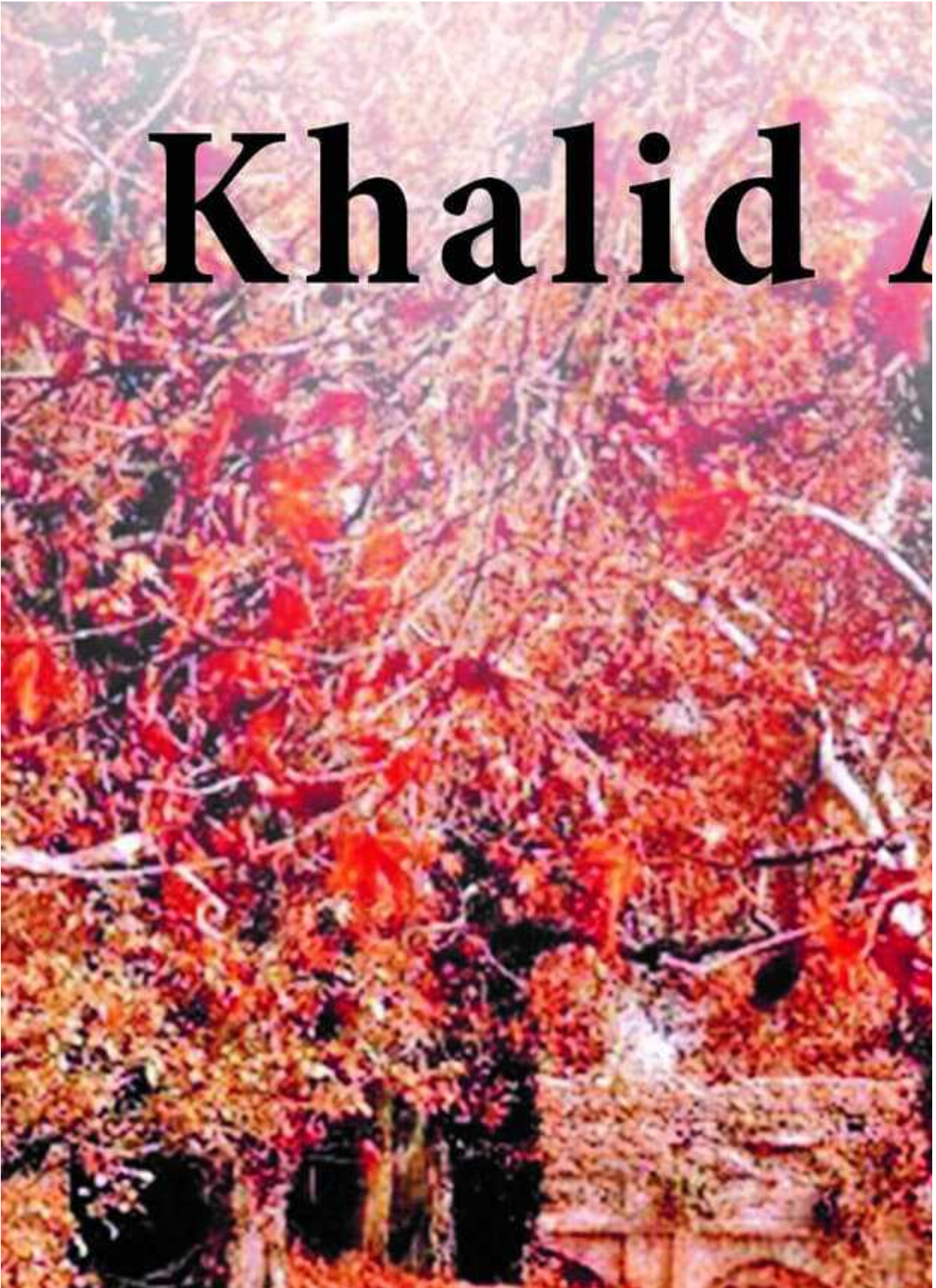


A photograph of a person walking away from the camera down a path covered in fallen autumn leaves. The path leads towards a stone structure, possibly a ruin or a small bridge, surrounded by large trees with vibrant red and orange foliage. The scene is bathed in the warm light of autumn.

Khalid Akhtar

KASHMIR
A Paradise Lost

Khalid A



KASHMIR A PARADISE LOST

KHALID AKHTAR

Students I E

INVINCIBLE PUBLISHERS

*Dedicated To those who
believe in peace, humanity
and the fraternity, To those
who toil to eradicate the
hatred, animosity and the
oppression, To those who
advocate justice and equality,
And to those who dream of a
nation built on moral values*

A CKNOWLEDGMENT

Kashmir and its valleys are deeply etched in my soul.

During my visits to Kashmir, I used to interact with the natives. Those conversations turned into my memoirs, which have helped me to weave my stories.

The Kashmiris are very kind-hearted and sincere people. Their sense of warm hospitality and respectful behavior is well-known all over the world. The beautiful Chinars are a treat, both for eyes and heart. These, actually 'glitterize' Kashmir along with its tranquil beauty.

However, the reality of a harassed generation and the groups of 'angry young men' has tainted its beauty.

The recent incidents evolving on this paradise on Earth have moved me from within. A place that charms people from across the globe is now turning into a controversial hub, similar to a battle-field. Nature has bestowed her blessings on the land of Kashmir but the man has inflicted painful destructions on the innocent inhabitants of the valley.

I have witnessed the peaceful and serene Kashmir, but that is just a single side of a coin. The other side has been marked by disturbance, oppressions and the killings of innocents. Indeed, it is famous for its beautiful lakes, orchestrated gardens, and gentle rivers, but the horrible silence of injustice echoes in the background. The long-going conflict has broken the backbone of the economy here. The education system in Kashmir has become weak and the youth has become perplexed. People have started to foresee no hopes for the next generation.

This book is a little effort from my end to bring the miseries of the Kashmiris to light. I have had come across several

untold stories, those stories had shattered me and eventually, I decided to pen them down in fictional stories. I have tried my best to present an unbiased description of their long-pending conflicts.

I, solemnly state that I strive not to blame any individual or a group or any authority for the crisis in Kashmir. The stories have come out of my imagination, which I have penned down to present an impartial view of the people of Kashmir.

I have intended not to touch upon the sensitive political background of the issue. I am interested in manifesting a social perspective of it.

I hope that this book in your hands helps you to connect to the milieu of the Kashmir.

I have tried my best to present my work free from any errors or misinformation. However, your valuable suggestions are welcome. I honor the sentiments of the people and I apologize if, by any chance, any part of the book hurts sentiments of the reader.

I am highly grateful to my friends who had kept me motivated during the writing of this book. I also thank the team of Invincible Publishers for making this book an actual reality, and especially Akshita who has helped me polish my stories.

I thank you all.

KHALID AKHTAR

THE CHINAR SPEAKS

On the banks of the timeless Dal Lake, Bashir Mohammad was resting in the cool shade of a beautiful Chinar. He found solace under the tree, and almost forgot his miseries for a while. He had crossed sixty; still, he was the sole bread-earner for his family.

He looked at his Shikara, which was beautifully adorned with luxurious seats and maroon carpets. Bashir, clothed in a long Phiran and a white skull-cap, gazed longingly towards the city.

The city was indeed a tourist hub, but he saw only a gloom prevailing around him. He would often look up towards the sky and then gaze down at his Shikara.

Be it the spring or the season of autumn, the Nargis flowers never failed to blossom and the tall Chinars always stood firm.

His heart sprang with happiness when he spotted a newly married couple on the bank of the lake. They approached him, saying, "The Lake looks so beautiful!"

He welcomingly said, "Indeed, it is!"

"Would you take us sailing on the lake?" They said.

Bashir whole-heartedly replied, "Oh, yes! Why not?"

Escorting them, Bashir started sailing his boat towards the 'Char Chinar', an island in the middle of the lake. The couple was profoundly enjoying the scenic beauty of the lake and

its surroundings and clearly, he did not want to disturb them. He kept sailing the boat with all his strength.

When they approached the middle of the lake, Bashir warmly asked them, "Where are you from?"

"We are from Jaipur, Rajasthan. I am Dinesh and this is my wife, Ravina. I work as a lecturer at Rajasthan University. Ravina is an MA graduate and she is currently preparing for a competitive exam. We are newlyweds and the valley had been my first choice to visit after my marriage." Dinesh said unhesitatingly.

"Oh, that is nice! You make an interesting, beautiful couple. What attracted you to this place?" Bashir said.

"It is the evergreen beauty of Chinar," Dinesh said.

"Its various colors blend charmingly with different seasons. I want to click a lot of pictures and videos to preserve the beauty of this place in my memory." Dinesh said.

Bashir replied, "You are right. The beauty of the Kashmir valley is highlighted by these trees. The tourists are left spellbound, and even a tired or oppressed person can find peace in the aegis of its shade."

The boat was slowly heading towards its destination. The couple was occasionally clicking pictures.

Dinesh looked at Bashir whose forehead had become damp with sweat.

"Sir, you are working hard even at this age. What about your family?" Dinesh asked.

"I used to have a son..." Saying this, Bashir almost choked up.

"What happened to your son?"

Bashir reluctantly answered, "He was shot dead by..."

"By whom?"

“Some army men.”

He added, “On that fateful day, all offices and shops were shut down in a protest against the illegal detention of the youth. The violence started brewing in the mob and in no time, the army started firing. Unfortunately, my son was on the terrace of the house, watching the terrible happenings. Out of the blue, a bullet hit him and he died right there, right then, unbelievably.”

Bashir’s voice receded to low while he wiped off his tears.

“It is plain injustice! He was innocent! The government must protect the lives and dignity of the people, not kill them blatantly!” Ravina suddenly became alive, who was silent until now.

“When I questioned them of my son’s killing even when he was not at fault, they started thrashing us with their boots and we were silenced forcefully. They imposed a curfew in the area, and we could not be fortunate enough to even perform my son’s final rites on time.”

The silence seeped in. “Oh, the Chinar is fiery and beautiful, but on the behest of holding fire within it. A fire can destroy the whole beauty of the forest.” Dinesh said.

“Even till this day, we shiver on the sight of army men,” Bashir said.

The ‘Char Chinar’ was not too far now. Also known as ‘the little island’, the majestic hub of Chinar trees gave an impression of total harmony. The trees almost looked like four inseparable friends, who walked ‘hand in hand’ and sang the songs of solidarity to eternity.

When they reached Char Chinar, four army men welcomed them.

“Show your IDs.” An army man asked in a harsh voice. The couple was startled.

“Sure, sir! We will show you our identity cards.”

The couple took out their IDs and presented them to the army officers.

“Okay.” He said to them roughly.

They de-boarded the Shikara and forgot what had happened just then as they caught the mesmerizing sight of the grand, old trees with their reflecting hues.

While the couple was busy clicking pictures and enjoying the cool shade of the trees, Bashir unfolded his praying mat on the ground, just under a Chinara tree. He started his ritual of ablution and followed with his namaz-e-zuhr. Raising his hands towards the sky, he prayed in Arabic.

Dinesh and his wife looked at Bashir in amazement. They saw a great, spiritual fervor in the old man’s prayers. Tears started to trickle down Bashir’s ‘grey-bearded’ face.

The couple was unable to decipher what he was whispering but, somehow caught his closing words “Oh God, let the peace prevail all over and make my country prosperous. Protect us from evils and the wrongdoers. I have lost my son, I still remember him in a pool of blood. Let nobody have this fate.”

The couple came closer to Bashir and asked, “Why are there tears in your eyes, Baba? What gave you so much torture?”

“We want peace without any interruption from the army, we want a good education for our children, we want employment for the youth, we want our businesses to flourish, we want the whole world to come here and witness the beauty of Kashmir. We are as beautiful, from within as our land. We want the powers of the world to leave us alone and let us decide our fate. Do we want something wrong?” Said Bashir.

Ravina was moved by the helplessness of the old fellow.

“Certainly not! This is what every citizen with self-respect would want. Turning citizens to slaves at gunpoint is highly undemocratic and is rather a dictatorship,” She said.

All the discussion was ongoing under the Chinar tree.

He looked up at the swirling leaves. He would gaze at the Chinar whenever he was heavy-hearted. It always relieved him of his miseries. It appeared as if the tree spoke to him.

Suddenly, there was a commotion caused by the patrolling of the army men. The couple was alarmed with this, and they insisted to return.

The royal-looking Shikara started heading towards the bank of the lake.

“It was a phenomenal visit, we enjoyed a lot but the presence of the army men made the tour a bit sour. Had they not been there, we would have enjoyed to the fullest!” Ravina said, ruminatively.

“We have been living under the shadow of the guns for decades; you can understand our miserable condition. But we thrive somehow and I hope the guns would not pose a threat to our survival in the future...” Bashir said.

As the Shikara reached the bank of the lake, Dinesh and Ravina got down, carrying heaviness in their hearts.

Ravina put her hand into her purse and paid respectfully to Bashir.

The couple smiled faintly, and Dinesh embraced Bashir. He gave his blessings and soon the couple was on their way back. They waved good-bye until they disappeared.

Bashir came back, under the same grand tree, in a hope that someone else would come and ask him to sail through the lake so that he could earn for his family.

He unfolded his mat and stretched down on it. He brooded looking at the dark-green leaves of the tree.

The tree seemed to him as a guard, as if saying, "Do not worry, I shall guard you, be it in the rain or a tempest; scorching heat or in snowfall. I shall always encourage you; I shall provide you cool shade even when you are resting in your grave."

E HOPELESS TERROR
VERY YEAR, THE
MONTH OF JULY IS
THE MONTH OF
HAPPINESS FOR FAZAL
AND HIS FAMILY. THIS
MONTH BRINGS A LOT OF
PROSPERITY TO HIM.

He is a helmsman of horses. It gives him an immense joy to ferry people on the back of his horse, all up to the holy cave at the top of the mountain. He is a kind, sixty-year-old man who is satisfied with whatever he is paid in return by his customers. Regardless of his tender, old age, his enthusiasm to serve people is still, as firm as the mountains. Fazaluddin has had been serving here for almost forty years.

He is usually identified by a traditional Kashmiri salwar-kurta and a dark-colored turban on his head. And, one can hear him speak, normally in the dialect of the old Kashmiri language. He is well-versed in Urdu too and people loved him for his honesty and simplicity.

“Jai Bhole Nath!” The religious pilgrims were chanting on the way to the top.

Fazal and his horse, whom he lovingly called ‘Bholu’, stood under a tree. He was waiting for his first customer of the day. Thousands of pilgrims could be seen swarming up the

mountain, laden with heavy loads. Some of them were riding on the horseback.

Most of the travelers were men in their fifties. The whole valley echoed with their fervor and the chanting of “Jai Bhole Nath!”

The journey was intermittently dispersed with helpful people who had arranged food, water, and shelter for the pilgrims. And surprisingly, the Muslims and Pathan brothers were the ones most included in the helpful people, serving selflessly to the Amarnath Yatris.

Fazal was turning a bit hopeless now since it was almost the middle of the day and no one had asked him for the ride, yet. As if being answered for his growing restlessness, he felt a soft tap on his shoulder. He turned around to see a bald middle-aged man wearing a gerua kurta, a white dhoti, and a matching turban.

Fazal’s eyes brightened with happiness. He recognized him instantly. It was Kripa Shankar from Bulandshahar.

“Oh, Kripa Shankar!”

“You have come back! And, after a long gap of four years.”

“How are you?” He said.

“Yes! It has been long. Conditions were not favorable at my place. So, I could not turn up for the yatra,” Replied Kripa Shankar.

“When people pass through difficult phases in their lives, they prefer to visit here for peace.” He quipped. They chuckled light-heartedly.

They chattered their hearts out as the two close friends had met after a long time.

Soon, they started riding, towards the holy cave. Kripa Shankar sat on the horseback and Fazal held the reigns of his beloved horse.

"I am impressed. This time, I observe that there are more people from Muslim organizations reaching out, with their helping hands. Everyone is welcoming us with their open hearts," Said Kripa Shankar.

"This is one of the peculiar traits of this locality. I have been serving the pilgrims for almost forty years and I have got unconditional love from all the quarters." Fazal said.

"But, the scenario is changing swiftly. Hatemongers are mushrooming in every street of our country, almost similar to a cancer tumor. News channels are full of provoking stories. Social media has incessantly brought us on the verge of a catastrophe. Those who hold power are propagating hate and getting dividends." Kripa Shankar said.

"Do not worry; they will not succeed in their evil schemes, certainly. We have our centuries-old bond of love and fraternity to back us up. It is supreme and the mightiest to be shattered easily. Please tell me, who are the enemies of peace?

Who are the ones trying to attack our multi-ethnic culture?

And, what do they want?" Fazal asked innocently.

"They are politicians, greedy for power. Their businesses and profits grow when there is any kind of polarization in our society, be it based on faith or religion. They receive the dividends and we, the Indians are getting more vulnerable to their immoral designs with each passing day." Kripa Shankar said.

"May they burn in the hell; they shed the blood of the innocents just for the sake of gaining power. They are dividing our society based on communal lines, on the differences that our country takes pride in." Fazal said.

"There is this old legacy of the British which is still surviving. The British adopted the "Divide and rule" strategy and had

ruled over India for over two centuries.” Kripa Shankar said.

“United we overcome and divided we shall fall,” Fazal said.

They were heading towards the holy cave. They came across the *Sangam* of the Amravati and Panchtarni rivers. Many devotees were being seen taking a dip in the holy waters of the confluence.

It was considered to refresh a person’s mind, body, and soul from the inside to out.

Changing the course of the conversation, Fazal asked, “Do you know, who Bhole was?”

“He was the first man who walked on the Earth,” He replied.

“Yes, you believe that the first pair of humans that God created on the Earth was the ‘Shankar and Parvati’ and we believe that the first pair was ‘Adam and Eve’. But, there is a certain difference in our beliefs. We regard Adam as the messenger of God. We don’t worship Adam. We consider him a creation of God and foremostly, a simple man.” Fazal said.

“Only names change in the patterns of our beliefs. And, certainly, we have made changes as per our needs,” He said.

The path was laced with the lush greenery on both sides. Deep ditches looked like crocodiles with their mouths opened. Both of them knew the path well and they knew the upheavals that it encountered.

Covering a considerable chunk of the journey, they reached the first stop.

Kripa Shankar got off the horse and they went to rest under the shadow of a tree. They opened their flimsy boxes of lunch and ate together on an opened mat.

Kripa Shankar stretched out lazily. Fazal performed ablution and followed with his Namaz-e- Zuhar.

They restarted their journey.

The whole valley almost flooded with the pilgrims. Their fervor and zeal to reach the holy cave at the top was a remarkable sight to behold. Fazal too murmured the name of the holy God. He selflessly served with every bit of effort that he could, to make his customer relaxed and content.

The sun was about to sink into the night. The shadows of the trees grew longer. It was getting dark. The birds could be seen flying on an altitude. A pleasant fragrance blew almost as the whiff of the evening.

“Suppose, Bhole Nath appears out of nowhere, what would you have asked for?” Fazal asked.

“I would have asked for the well-being and prosperity for my family,” Kripa Shankar replied.

“And, what would you have asked for?” Kripa Shankar asked.

“I would have asked God to wipe out all the sufferings of men. I would have asked him for peace, prosperity, and justice to prevail everywhere.” Fazal replied.

Abruptly, they heard a strange uproar. They saw people running and crying, everywhere around them, causing a stampede.

They heard a roar of gunshots. It was a terrorist attack on one of the buses of the pilgrims. The terrorists were showering bullets relentlessly.

Fazal got alerted and he asked Kripa Shankar to get off the horse. He lent his hand to help him get off and asked him to hide behind a rock. Fazal, on the other hand, stood guarding him.

“You need not fear anything, they won’t be able to harm you, when I am with you,” Fazal said.

“Jai Bhole Nath, Jai Bhole Nath,” Kripa Shankar started chanting fervently.

The firing started getting fierce and they were targeting the pilgrims. Kripa Shankar was shivering with fear.

He started to pray, "Oh lord, help me get out of the trouble for this time, I shall never come back to this place again."

Just then a bullet was shot nearby, almost escaping them. Fazal asked him to lie flat on the earth. They could now hear the sounds of the heavy trucks moving on the neighboring sides. They heard army men galloping to their positions. They witnessed a ferocious encounter between both sides. The terrorists soon started to escape into the oblivion of the dark evening.

"Come Up! Come! We are out of danger now."

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

"Why did the terrorists attack here?" Kripa Shankar asked.

"They wanted Kripa Shankar to believe that Fazal is his biggest enemy. They were not happy with Kripa Shankar traveling on the back of a horse which was a Muslim's." Fazal said.

"Yes, when they see Kripa Shankar and Fazaluddin walking hand in hand, they think that the power is going out of their control. On seeing this, they start burning like a pyre." Kripa Shankar said.

"Their efforts would bring no fruit for them."

"Certainly not."

"Let us rise now and start again, we have to reach the top of the mountain."

They rose and embraced each other. The night had set in. Fazal helped Kripa Shankar to mount on the horse-back. He took the reins of Bholu in his hand and set off towards the destination, looking like a warrior who has had just won a battle.

RETURN OF THE NATIVE
THE COLD WIND BLEW,
ADDING TO THE FINE
WEATHER. THE
WEATHER LOOKED UPON
THE AIR OF CELEBRATION
THAT THRIVED IN THE CITY
THAT DAY. IN AN
ENTHUSIASTIC FERVOR,
PEOPLE WERE FLOCKING
TO THE LAL CHOWK. IT
WAS A MOMENT OF
IMPORTANCE AS THE 'OLD
NATIVE' HAD RETURNED
AFTER THE LONG GAP OF
THIRTY YEARS. THE JOY
FOR HIS RETURN SPREAD

LIKE A WILDFIRE TO ALL THE QUARTERS OF THE CITY.

Altaf almost stumbled over his long *Phiran* .

He did not want to be late in meeting the 'old native'; he started hurrying towards the Chowk.

The 'old native' secured a soft spot in his forty-year-old heart, etched deeply in his childhood memories. Recollecting his memory, he warmly thought of the affectionate Roshan Lal, the shopkeeper that he often used to go to. Altaf was very young at that time. Roshan Lal used to fondly call him 'Allu'. He used to chatter endlessly with him and care for Altaf like he would have cared for his son.

Altaf remembered the occasion when Roshan tended to him during an accident. It was Roshan who rushed him to the hospital before his parents were told of the misfortunate accident. And, Roshan lovingly looked after him until he was discharged from the hospital.

Altaf's family and Roshan Lal used to celebrate festivals together, with warm embraces and exchanges.

Altaf used to guzzle on piping hot *gulab jamuns* and *rassgullas* that Roshan brought for them on the Diwali. And, on Eid, his father and Altaf never forgot to visit Roshan Uncle with *Sheer khurma* .

As Altaf approached the Chowk, he saw people gathering towards the old returnee. The people seemed like musical notes in harmony.

The drums were being thumped and the songs of solidarity were sung in the grandeur of his welcoming.

Roshan reached to his shop. His joy knew no bounds as he looked upon the old shop; the shop seemed to leap up as if its master had finally come back to rescue it. The shop had been dilapidated and was in poor condition.

Abdul Rehman rushed to greet him. They affectionately embraced each other. The long-lost glint was back in their eyes as they embraced again.

“Roshan! These lanes had become colorless without you these years and now, you have filled the streets with colors by coming back. I hail a reveling welcome to you. Welcome! All the way!”

“The past years had been similar to a painful exile for me as if a fish had been hurled out of the water. This holy place is where I had born. This is the place where my father and forefathers had born, worked and dedicated their lives. My ancestors and I have received immense respect and love in this land, from all the four directions.” Roshan said.

Nushrat Ali, his former neighbor in the market, came forward and embraced Roshan with a fragrant garland.

“We had missed you every day since you left and we adamantly ask you not to leave the place again. Our Kashmiriyat is incomplete without you and sends forth the message of togetherness to the world and its critics, this is an undivided land regardless of our ethnicities,” Said Nushrat.

Roshan replied befittingly, “Critics would be turned down and hate-mongers would be defeated. With us united, a hope of the peace prevails, fearlessly.”

Sheikh Muhammad, the imam came forward and graciously honored him with a traditional *taqiyah* .

“We pay our heartiest welcome to you, Roshan. It is your homecoming indeed.” He said.

“I had always known just this town, my home here and the neighbors. It had been a traumatic experience for me after I left this place. I stayed at different camps set for refugees. In my own country, I was treated as a refugee. And you don’t know how much it had hurt me to be called a refugee in my own country. What does it need to prove one’s love for his country?” Roshan Lal said.

Altaf stood impatiently in the mob, holding a large bouquet to greet him. It was just then when Roshan spotted him.

“Altaf! My dear child!” Roshan stretched out to embrace him.

“You have grown up to be a man now; I saw you last when you were a little boy of ten. I recognized you without a second doubt, my son!” Roshan said.

“Even, how could have I forgotten you, your love and affection for me? You cared for me as my parents did. Your children and I had played together.

But, how are you able to recognize me after all these years?”

“Oh, it is your eyes, which have not changed, at all. They still gleam of your modesty.” Quipped Roshan. The whole crowd cracked to laughter.

Hand in hand, both of them proceeded towards the stage set for Roshan’s grand welcoming. With Altaf and people packed around the stage, he rose to address them.

“To all my dear brothers and fellows, we are a lineage to the society that had existed here for centuries. This is my native place.

Unfortunately, due to some bad blood in our community, some terrible happenings took place in the past. Sometimes, a small beetle can harm a wholesome garden. It tore down our togetherness overnight, that togetherness which was built over centuries.

I solemnly implore you all to forget those ill-fated times for the sake of our future generations. We all need to help this place regain its paradise.

I desire to live on my birth land, more than gaining the whole luxuries outside. Our land deserves its lost glory, and there was never a better time to be united than today.

I am grateful to all of you, for this grand welcome. The respect and love that you have showered on me is even beyond the gratitude that I can offer."

As he completed, people started enlivening and embracing each other. Roars of slogans and a unified spirit echoed in the air. Altaf and he raised their hands together. People raised their hands in accord and the crowd cheered in unison. He had never imagined that their flame of affection would still be firm after this long time.

As the crowd receded, Altaf said to Roshan, "My father and everyone at my home have been waiting for you. We have prepared a delicious feast. My mother still remembers your favorite delicacies."

"Ah. The food at your home still lingers in my memory. And it adds up to the joy of eating together.

These past years, I have been a refugee. I still have haunting memories of the dark days, but now it is the break of the dawn and let's feast like the lords of the land again!" Roshan said.

Almost then, there was a loud blast heard nearby. People began running hither and thither. In a large stampede, they were helplessly running to save themselves. Big chaos started spreading everywhere.

Amid the panic, Roshan said, "It looks like the hate mongers are unrelenting, and we must not waste a single minute now."

“Armored with our forefathers’ blessings, we would not sleep until we defeat them in their unholy designs!” Altaf said.

They looked in one another’s eyes; there were only love, sympathy and dedication for each other.

Collecting the remembrances with them, they walked together to Altaf’s home for the warm lunch.

H THE NIGHT HE LOOKED ALL AROUND HIMSELF; THERE WAS ONLY SHEER DARKNESS THAT PREVAILED.

The tranquility looming over the woods seemed shriller than the hooting of the wild beasts, and the trees cast their silhouettes in the dark of the night, appearing like ghosts.

His nerves started to twitch fearfully as the leaves rustled on the path.

He looked around again. He was indeed familiar with all these paths. He was well-versed with the music of the flowing water beside him. The tall mountains always stood guarding everyone.

Nature was his source of inspiration to face the difficulties on his way, there was no basis to be fearful of it.

Shaukat Ali was returning to his native village that he had left, two months back. The long *phiran* that he wore had become dusty and tattered. His shoes had become ragged and worn out but his eyes gleamed of hope.

He climbed up to the top of the rugged, big boulder which was shaped like a big, black cloud on a rainy day.

He had always caught a fascinating view of the village from there. Only a few houses were illuminated by the candle lights since there was a shortage of electric supply in the village. His ancestral village, Ludhwa was famous for its red,

ripe apples of the best quality. And, it was equally famous for the gentleness of its natives, and their hospitality.

When he caught the glimpse of his village, he was overjoyed with his rushing memories. His village seemed like a tiny colony of elfin people under the lofty mountains. They seemed to have their own world, unaware of the cruelty and wickedness running parallel in the world. Their world was scuttled by compassion and love.

He climbed down the boulder and started to head towards his home, silently.

He sensed the familiar scent of the soil. He couldn't contain his happiness today, as after a gap of two months he was finally, going to meet his wife.

He reached to an old Chinar tree. His home could be sighted, just a few meters away.

He started to tremble from his head to toe. The thought of facing his mother and wife made him quiver.

"How would I face them?"

"How would I look them in the eye?"

"How would I wipe off tears in their eyes?" Multiple thoughts started to dart at him.

His heart sank and a sense of guilt started to engulf him. The innocent cries began to ring his ears again, the cries that had tormented him each day, for the past two months.

Oh! No one could understand how much he wanted to forget that night. That memory still burnt like fire within him.

He vividly remembered the night when some 'monsters' in trucks had swarmed in the whole village. They had forced all the male members to come out of the homes at the gunpoint.

All men, including children, were transported to an unknown lodging and were forced to be silent. Shaukat was one of the

prisoners. He remembered his helplessness and long-wound up anger grew in him.

The shrieks of innocent mothers and girls still haunted him. He remembered, the grief-stricken cries had been reaching up to the skies, but nobody had turned up to help them, no one could. The heavy, stomping boots and the barrels of the guns had tightened their mouths.

The next day, those men had left the village and had freed the prisoners.

Shaukat could not have collected the courage to face his family. He decided to flee, for something that he was guilty and angry for, at the same time. He decided to leave the village forever, but his eyes burned with the anger of revenge.

He had just got married. His wife and he both had harbored a beautiful future in their dreams. They promised to stay with each other, no matter what may befall. But, there he was, crushed after he had fled, leaving his family all alone.

These two months had been a nightmare for him. He went looking all over the region, for those 'monsters'. He was seeking the severest punishment for them. He had pledged that he would not return home until he saw those men hanging on the gallows.

In utter hopelessness, he had decided to return home. His voice was muffled by the cries and the batons. He had nothing left, except painful guilt towards his family.

He stepped nearer to his home. His beloved must have been counting the days and nights since he had left.

He tiptoed to his house's thatched window. He glued his ear to it. He could hear his mother and wife's voice.

"Two months have passed since Shaukat had left us; we even don't know if he is alive." His mother said.

“Don’t say this, Ma. My heart says that he is alive and around us. He will return someday.” His wife said.

“Most of the men had returned but he didn’t. He is a man with self-esteem, perhaps he could not have tolerated the dignity of our family to be plundered so brutally.” His mother said.

“If that is so, he must have gone mad.” His wife shivered.

“Rubina had told me that her husband had seen him that night. He said that Shaukat had wept silently; he had spotted him last in the next morning when he saw him storming out in anger.” His wife said.

His wife was sitting on a wrought sofa. She wore a long, blue *phiran* with a scarf tied on her head. She looked weak.

She recollected the afflictions that had befallen that night. She began to weep loudly.

“If he comes back, I shall not forgive him. My chastity was molested, my honor looted, and my dignity was shattered when he was alive; he could not come to rescue me.

If he would have been a martyr, would not that have been a pride for us? Instead, he fled away.” His wife said.

Her wailing and her words pricked his heart.

She began to weep louder. “Oh Shaukat, I left my father’s home to give you a world of happiness. During the nikah, you had promised to provide me honor, dignity, and respect. You had promised to protect me. You left me helpless, in front of those wolves.” His wife choked.

The earth appeared to have moved, for Shaukat. He held the wall tight, helplessly, to save him from falling.

His wife continued, “Oh, Shaukat, my dear husband, those who have looted my honor are walking on earth like kings. They continue to hiss like serpents. They play with our dignity as if it is a baton to pass, on a battlefield. I shall not

let you in, Shaukat, until I see those men behind the bars. And, if you are incompetent, tell me; come back to tell me. Let me go out, I will kill them all. Let me show the might of a torn woman."

He could not listen to his wife anymore.

After a pause, Shaukat thought, "I have to put out the fire of contempt burning within her.

How can I do that now?"

Shaukat thought, "I must go back. I have to avenge the disgrace on my family."

He stepped back silently and started retracing his steps.

On his way, he climbed up the boulder again. He glanced at his village, perhaps for the last time. The whole village had fallen into the lap of peaceful sleep. The wild animals had stopped hooting. In the dark silence of the night, the sobs of his wife had been still ringing in his ears.

THE PELLET BOY

“Please call a doctor or take me to a hospital, mother.”
“I want to go to play with my friends again.”

“I want to read my books.”

“I want to see the beautiful world again.” Saleem was sobbing. He sat on the bed and requested his parents to bring his vision back.

His parents had become perpetually worrisome for much time since then. Their son was just 12 years old.

Saleem had marks of pellet gun injuries all over his body.

He had developed pustules on the cheeks, nose and even on the eyelids. His entire body looked like the red-spotted flesh of an animal. And, he had been directly hit by a pellet in his eyes, which left him partially blind for life.

Saleem had been a bright student and was deeply interested in his studies.

Ghulam Muhammad, his father was a humble shopkeeper in their street. His shop just had usual, daily grocery items.

It was not easy for Ghulam to afford the month's expenses by his mere earnings. However, he had nourished a lot of hopes for his son, Saleem. His dreams had shattered when his only-son lost vision due to a pellet. He had taken him to innumerable hospitals and specialists but in vain.

“Ammi, my whole body aches,
It pains when I open my eyelids.

My back pains as if a lot of needles have been thrust there.” Saleem started yelling.

“Saleem, do not worry, you will be fully alright within a month; the doctor has said that if you take medicines regularly, everything will be fine soon.” His mother said.

Saleem’s mother, Zareena was a housewife. The family could not afford their son’s treatment; she had started working as a domestic help in the neighborhood.

With each passing day, it became difficult for her to cool him down. He became increasingly adamant.

He became restless whenever he demanded something and would start to cry stubbornly. His parents had started to become anxious.

She remembered the day when Saleem had returned from school.

Saleem had said, “Assalam-o-Alaikum, Ammijaan! My half-yearly results have been declared and I have, again got the first rank! Look at my prize, Ammi.”

“I am going outside to play with my friends. I would return in an hour. Khuda Hafiz!” Saying this, he rushed joyfully to meet his waiting friends outside.

She continued thinking of that day-Zareena was busy preparing a meal for her family when she heard of a massive outburst outside. Her heart begun to race loudly. She was trembling thinking of her son outside the home.

“Lord, show mercy on my little child.”

“Oh God, you are most merciful to your people.” She had started chanting the prayers while she opened the door and came out.

There had been a great disturbance everywhere. She saw clouds of smoke rising high in the skies. People ran hither and thither. Her heart sunk and she started to run towards

the playground. She saw many people laid unconscious on her way.

She had started to shout, "Saleem, Saleem, Where are you, my son?"

She had been not much far from her home when she spotted a familiar person. It was Mehmood. He had been lifting a boy on his shoulders.

Zareena started to wail loudly. Saleem was bleeding profusely and was crying in terrible pain.

"What has happened? What happened to my son?" she had stuttered.

"They started firing on the crowd with pellet guns; Saleem was playing with his friends in a playground. A conflict incited by some people had started to grow nearby. They started firing indiscriminately; even the children could not have been saved." He said.

"I curse them! Lord is watching everything." She said. Her face wet with tears. She had started to boil with anger.

They had rushed Saleem to a nearby hospital. He was admitted for a week.

The doctors tried their best but they could not bring back his vision, they advised his parents to take him home. They recommended providing him with medicines regularly.

Since then, Zareena had been looking after her son during the day and the night. She has never been agitated by his obstinate behavior. Her pain had become more excruciating every day since her son had lost vision.

She was thinking about the fateful incident when she was in the kitchen, cooking the evening's meal. It was just then when Saleem started crying again,

"Ammi, take me to a doctor,

I want to go and play with my friends waiting outside for me!

I want to see you, Ammi, and if you do not take me to a doctor right now, I won't eat anything."

Zareena went up to her son's room.

She cast a sight at his full face. It was brutally damaged with a hundred small wounds.

She looked at his lips, cheeks, nose and glided her sight over his face many times. Her eyes started to overwhelm with tears.

Zareena tried to touch his head, Saleem started crying, "Go away, go!"

"You can't do anything, let me go out! I won't eat!" He began to weep bitterly.

"No, my dear, you cannot go out in this condition, you are not well. First, get well. As soon as you get good again, I promise, we'll go for a picnic." She said.

She kissed his forehead and combed his hair with her fondling fingers. Saleem soon dived into the sleep.

Zareena turned back and silently went out of his room. His husband was standing there. They looked at each other. Their faces reflected gloom.

"We have no money left for doctors' payments and medicines," Zareena said, her face drooping down.

"We have already spent a lot of money; still, Saleem is the same as before. May hell befall on those people who have done this to our innocent child. Our dreams have no meaning now when our family has been pushed 'on the road'. God would not forgive them.

What are these times? Even the god is not hearing us!" He sighed.

“The cursing sighs of the vulnerable people are mightier than any power of the world. Sooner or later, heaven would hear our cries. Our curses can collapse the powerful dynasties, I know this.

The silence of our toleration will be paid off.” She said.

“Zareena, if we give our house on lease, we will be able to arrange money for the best treatment for our son.

He would be able to see the world again; he could go to school and play with his friends.” He said.

He continued, “We would be left with nothing, but... we have to do something for our son.”

“He is the apple of my eyes, he is my ‘everything’.”

“Alright, you do whatever you want, just look for a doctor, who can bring his sight back, somehow.” She said with a long face.

Suddenly, someone started thumping the main door of their house.

“Who could be it, and at this time?” They thought.

There stood some armed men at the door.

“We have to look in your house; we think that some terrorists have invaded your region, so please come out.” Said one of the armed men in a harsh voice.

They rummaged in the house and found nothing that they were suspicious of.

Saleem woke up by this sudden disturbance and started to scream.

Zareena anxiously ran up his room and came down, taking him in front of them.

She held his hand tightly.

She said furiously, “This is your terrorist, arrest him!”

Stooping down in despair, she said “You cruel people! Look, look, this is what have you done to my innocent son.”

“What was his fault? He was blinded for what?” She choked.

When those armed men looked at the damaged face of Saleem, their faces contorted with pity.

One of them put his hands on his head and watched his wounds closely.

Saleem looked at them and then, at his mother.

His eyes were full of fear.

He said innocently, “Ammi, will they fire at me, again?”

“It pains me a lot, I can’t take it anymore.” Saleem started sobbing.

“No, my dear son, don’t be afraid. You have not done anything wrong.” Zareena comforted him.

“Ammi, do they have those fire bullets in their guns?” He started shaking.

He turned to the armed men and said, “I promise, I shall do as you say. Please don’t fire on me.”

They all looked at the small, scarred face of Saleem with sympathy.

He held his mother tightly, and said, “I am hungry, Ammi, I would eat whatever you tell me to, but, please don’t call them again at our house.” Saleem looked in her eyes with a tensed face.

The armed men looked at the parents, paid a tight-lipped obeisance with their caps, and started walking out.

THE POLLING STATION

It was an important day for the people of this small village. They were going to elect their government today. They would be voting for their respective representatives who had promised to speak for them in the parliament. They had promised to raise their problems in front of the country's council and ask the government to resolve them for the public interest.

But, on the contrary, the people looked reluctant to celebrate this day.

All the people including the men and women, the old and young were ordinarily busy doing their everyday, household errands.

The people of this village were an epitome of firmness reflected by the surrounding mountains and the serene loyalty reflected by the flowing native river.

The murmur of the rivulets coupled with the birds' chirping made this little village, a masterpiece of natural beauty.

In the premises of an old government school, which had been often locked during the year, the polling officials had camped to conduct an error-free electoral process.

However, there were no garlands or cheering to welcome them.

The polling station was decorated with the posters and banners appealing people to vote. They had also pasted the instructions for voters to cast their votes, alongside.

There were other posters too, indicating the candidates this year, and what documents a voter has to bring with him. There were seven hundred and sixty-four voters who had been enrolled for voting in this village.

It was already 10 AM, but nobody had turned up to cast a vote. The polling officials were surprised at the almost zero turnouts in the polling. They were aware that there had been no 'boycott the ballot' campaigns growing in the village, too. There had been a massive deployment of the military outside the polling station so that the voters could cast their votes fearlessly.

"I think that only 5% of voters would turn up".

"Who knows? But, what is preventing them from casting their votes?"

"Maybe, they are not interested in politics. What would politics do in this beautiful village, eh?"

"I have heard that some militants have threatened them."

"No, the Kashmiris are brave enough; they don't care about such threats. There could be some other reason." The party members had just started to have discussions over the tea.

Just then, two young men entered the polling station. They were in their twenties. The heavily-armed men started to check them. They asked them to show their identity and voter cards, and the voter slips. The men obediently showed their documents to them.

They were allowed to cast their votes. They were followed to the room where the EVM and VVPAT equipment were set up. After passing through the process, they stood in front of a private cabin where nobody could watch their voting choices. One by one, both of them pushed the buttons, which was followed by a confirmation ring. The young men looked content after casting their votes.

“Why are the people of your village not turning up to vote?” One of the polling officers asked them.

“Like others, I am also not interested in voting. I have come here just to know the voting process. I am delighted to cast my first vote.” One of them giggled.

“That sounds good; I wish that candidate wins for whom you have voted for.” Another polling officer said.

“I have pushed the last button which belonged to NOTA” The boy quipped.

The polling officers burst into laughter. The two young men came out, wearing a perplexed look.

When the stipulated time for polling was about to end, some vehicles stopped in front of the old school. Some people which included some young men and women got off the group of vehicles and started heading towards the school gate sternly. The armed guards were alerted. The guards started checking the incoming visitors one by one. They were then sent into the polling rooms consecutively. A hoard of some professional photographers was clicking photographs and shooting the proceedings. All the voters had cast their votes. When they finished, they all were followed back into the vehicles from the decorated polling station.

“So far, everything has been fine and smooth. Our team will be pictured in tomorrow’s newspapers with a caption, “A heavy voting turnout in the valley, people waited in long queues.”.” Said one of the officers.

The whole team laughed whole-heartedly.

“S THE GARDEN
HALL I START
WITH THE
FIRST STORY OF
WHAT HAPPENED IN
THIS UNIVERSE,
EVEN BEFORE THE
ARRIVAL OF MAN ON
THE EARTH?” ABDUL
KARIM SAID TO HIS
GRANDCHILDREN,
WHO WAITED
IMPATIENTLY FOR HIS
STORY AFTER THE
DINNER EVERY
NIGHT.

Since the TV and mobiles had gone silent for much time, it was the best pastime for the whole family to listen to their grandfather's stories before going to bed.

Within minutes, his son, Rafique, and grandchildren, Yawar, Sajid, Arshi, and Adeeba surrounded him and said, "Yes, yes, of course."

"But, this story needs your absolute attention as it describes what brought 'the man's exit' from the holy gardens of heaven."

"You will come to know of who is our worst enemy on Earth, who is pushing the man towards the hell, of who does not like peace on the Earth and loves only the bloodshed, and the one who always suggests men disobey divine guidance." He said.

The vast room was almost air-tight with thick curtains covering the transparent windows. A beautiful, sapphire-colored carpet filled the floor. The children sat around him, stuffed in a warm blanket and at their center, a *Kanger* fumed with burning black charcoal, glowing warmly in the beautiful room.

Sakina, his wife stepped in the room with the Samavar (the traditional Kashmiri tea-pot) and smiled gently, "First enjoy the tea that I've made and then listen to your grandfather."

Sakina poured the hot tea into the glasses and they all began to sip slowly.

The grandfather was all set to start the story of the day.

"So, listen carefully." He began.

One day, God said to the angels, "I will create a vicegerent on Earth."

"Who is a vicegerent?" Yawar, his grandson asked.

"A person who exercises powers on behalf of a ruler is called a vicegerent. Men are regarded as earthly representatives of

God.” Grandfather replied.

He paused for a while and then, resumed: “Then, the angels said, “Will you place one who would cause mischief and shed blood? We celebrate your praise and glorify your holy name.”

“I know what you don’t know,” God said.

So, God created Adam and taught him the names of all things. The first present that God bestowed upon Adam, was the knowledge of the universe as much as he could.

Then, he placed Adam before the angels and said to them, “Tell me the names of the things of the universe, I’ll tell you if you are right.”

The holy angels replied, “You are all glorified, we have no knowledge of anything, except what you have taught us and you are the one who is perfect in knowledge and the wisdom.”

“O Adam, tell them the names,” God asked him.

When Adam had enumerated the names, God said, “Did I not tell you that I know the secrets of heaven and Earth, and I know what you could reveal and what to conceal?”

Hence, God manifested the supremacy of Adam over the angels. This was the first test conducted by the creator, which was passed by Adam.

As if it was not sufficient, God wanted to seal it forever.

He said to angels, “Bow down to Adam.”

All the angels bowed down to Adam, except the Satan. He refused to bow down. He was one of those who rejected faith.

“What prevented you from bowing down, when I have commanded you?” God said to Satan.

"I am better than him, you created me from fire and him from clay," Satan said.

He defiantly refused to accept the supremacy of man. Adam was rewarded for his obedience, gratefulness, and submission to God while Satan was thrown out of the gates of the garden, with disrespect.

"Get out from here, you have disgraced me," God said.

Satan got furious and began to bite his nails. God had elevated the man but, Satan was discarded from the garden of heaven. He could not bear the disrespect and said, "Because you have thrown me out, I will be waiting for them in my dungeon. Then, I will assault them before them, behind them, from their left, and right. Nor, would you find, in most of them, gratitude for your mercies."

"Get out, you, the meanest creature, if any of them follows you, I would fill the hell with you all, first," God said.

"Give me a respite till the day they are raised," Satan said.

"Be thou among those who have respite," God said to Satan and turned towards Adam.

"O Adam, you and your wife Eve, would dwell in the garden, eat bountifully, anything, but do not approach the tree, that I've alerted you of, otherwise you will run into transgression," God said to Adam.

Then, after a while, Satan began to whisper to Adam, "O Adam, your lord has forbidden you of this tree lest you should become immortals,"

"O Adam, I shall lead you to the tree of eternity and to a kingdom that never decays," he swore to him as if, he was the most sincere.

As a result, they couldn't be more tempted and both of them, Adam and Eve, had a bite of the tree's fruit.

So, by shrewd deceit, Satan brought their fall. When they tasted the tree, their shame manifested and they began to sew together, the leaves of the garden, over their bodies.

Thus did Adam disobey His Lord and allow himself to be seduced, and their Lord called upon them, "Did I not forbid you of that tree and tell you that Satan was your avowed enemy?"

They said, "Our Lord, we have wronged our souls; if you do not forgive us and bestow your mercy on us, we shall be lost." His Lord chose them for his grace; after all, they were one of his dearest creations. He turned to them and guided them.

"Adam and Satan, you would get down from the garden, with enmity between you both. The Earth would be your dwelling place and your single means of livelihood, for a particular time. There would reach to you, guidance from me, whoever follows my guidance will neither lose his way nor fall into misery. But, whoever turns away from my message, for him, is a life narrowed down to degradation, and I shall raise him blind on the Day of Judgment." God declared.

The assault of Satan on the men continues to the day. He takes advantage of our emotions, and sometimes, even our generous sympathies are used to decoy us into the snares of cursed Satan. Man has every reason to be grateful of God for his loving care, but sometimes, the man, in a folly forgets his gratitude and does the very opposite of what he should do.

From that day, both Adam and Satan are on the Earth and live as the worst enemies of each other. Adam and his lineage desire to return to their original land, 'The garden', and on the other hand, Satan conspires to keep them away from it. In his desperate efforts, Satan regularly whispers to

Adam's children, tempting them to disobey the guidance that hails from God."

His wife and children were listening to him silently. Their eyes glittered as a lot of questions arose in their minds.

"God expelled man from the garden because of his disobedience but, who has expelled us from our paradise?" Yawar asked.

"Did we too, disobey God?" Sajid asked.

"We are being punished for which fault of ours?"

"Did Satan trap us with his false suggestions?" Their questions were never-ending.

The fire in the *Kangad* started to cool down. The embers had turned into ash. Grandfather pulled out his hands atop the *Kangad* and rubbed them in frisky helplessness. He restrained himself from answering the queries of his grandchildren.

He smiled vaguely and said, "Oh look, it has got very dark outside, we must go to sleep now."

THE MAIDEN'S SONG

While ascending the high hills, and treading on a narrow, serpentine pathway, I fumbled with the bag on my back. The shoulder strap had started to itch and my legs had started to feel heavy. Nevertheless, I moved on to reach the next stop.

The wonderful landscape glinted in my eyes. It was incredibly beautiful, the vastness of the region, the orchards of the fresh apples glowing with the morning dew, and the serene lakes.

I had come to the beautiful valley of Kashmir; I had walked here from the deserts of Rajasthan.

The enthusiasm to meet my friends in Kashmir after long kept me going.

On the rubbled way, out of nowhere, I heard a beautiful voice singing. I could make out that it was of a girl's, and that it was sung with the heart.

The whole valley looked like echoing with her voice, sweeter than that of a nightingale. The song made me forget my straining legs and the long tiredness.

I have had come to this place many times, I had a slight understanding of the regional dialect. I tried to guess what she was singing;

"The beauty of the hills fades away,
With the night and the time.

The breeze too, ain't that loyal,

Fall, the leaves and
Whisks on the graves of the forgotten martyrs.
And yet, it is the Chinar,
Which stands firm, not ready to bow down.”
I smiled faintly.
I could fathom the pain in her song.
I stopped for a moment and looked around. I wanted to see
who sang.
If I could find her, I would rather say to her,
“Dear, perhaps nature presents its best gifts to the man
when he is at his highest pleasure. This happiness adds all
around and it inspires nature to bloom to the fullest. The
lovely faces of young couples make the branches of trees to
bow down and kiss the foreheads of the lovers. But, what is
the use of the woman’s make-up if her lover is in utter
despair?”
The agony sprouted deep from her heart and scooted
directly to the hearts who listened to it.
She must have been busy doing her errands of the day. But,
the whole valley seemed to echo with her melancholic song.
She continued, unnoticed;
“The flying birds are singing sad,
The water murmurs with gloom,
The children’s eyes brim with fear,
The widows often lament and shed tears.
And yet, the rocks stand firm, never to surrender.”
It was as if she exhaled the miseries of the years and the
sorrowful decades of the valley.
Truly, living animals, as well as the non-living, do
understand the sentiments of the man.

The supreme creation of the universe, 'the man' has now degraded down to be harassed and denied freedom. His blood is shed just to keep him silent. It is downright despair for humanity.

Under such adverse conditions, can one expect the birds to sing cheerfully? I wanted to explain this to her.

The outburst of her emotions, her song continued;

"The flowers have forgotten to blossom,

The buds fear to be born.

Earth has become red, rivers flow red,

Fatherless children mourn.

Yet, the soldiers stand firm, never giving up."

"Who has hurt her so badly?" I wondered.

I thought, "The flowers blossom when they allow the bees to collect the nectar. They spread their fragrance only to attract the bees. If they don't turn up to the flowers and collect nectar, then what is the use of spreading the fragrance? The mourning of the fatherless children has indeed turned the Earth and rivers to red."

She continued, unnoticed,

"The sun burns up everything all around,

The moon sneaks from behind the cloud,

The stars appear to have stopped twinkling,

The river of blood has started flowing.

And, yet the children look above, asking for help from heaven."

I was spellbound by this excruciatingly beautiful song of hers.

I whispered, "You are certainly right, young maiden. When sobs of the innocents reach a height, it brings anger to

nature; therefore, the sun burns more aggressively, perhaps. When shrieks of the young girls chime with the surface of the moon, it trembles and tries to hide its face behind the heavy clouds. And dear you, unknown singer, now the children do not recite poems asking stars to blink since their eyes brim of fear, so the stars have stopped blinking.”

The song had an everlasting effect on my mind. Her notes became sharper with every snippet of her song, voice gloomier and tone more heart-rending.

She continued,

“It is bleeding all around,

In the homes and on the ground.

The wheels jammed, schools are shut and books are locked,
Only graveyards are open for the dead and the shocked.

And, yet the valley stands eternally, constant.”

“Oh, the nightingale of the mountains, I can no longer listen to your sorrowful stories,” I mumbled to myself.

“Your grief-stricken words could collapse cruel dynasties.”

“Your sighs can cause a tempest.”

“And, your sorrowful song could shake the whole Earth.” I thought.

I started to walk up again. Her voice began to dwindle. She still sang with the same passion.

It appeared that the birds, trees, rivers and the mountains, too listened to the pastoral singer. Their silence loudly nodded to the outpour which gushed from her heart.

FREEDOM

The city was under a complete blockade. The internet, mobile connections, and the landline connections had been blocked; people were left in complete darkness, a total cut-off from the rest of the world.

A tight curfew had been imposed and people were shut indoors. The political leaders remained under a house-arrest and their activities were kept under a high vigilance.

A week before all of this, there was hearsay that something of a major change is about to happen. The change was welcomed with a total blockade.

Yusuf peeped out of his window; there was a dreadful silence seeping outside and everywhere. Only the groups of the army men, armored with the guns on their shoulders, could be sighted on the road. There were some stray animals too, meandering and eating the trash scattered on the road. Some birds also joined them on their feast and some of them fluttered fearlessly, on the backs of the grazing animals.

People were not cheerful. Yusuf, his family, and other similar families were passing through one of the most perplexing and fearsome phases in their lives. They were cut off from their relatives in, and outside the valley. The ration in the kitchen had started to be meager.

Yusuf's old father laid on the bed, brooding over the circumstances. His school-going children were asking him about the happenings around them and the reasons for their

schools shutting down. One of Yusuf's friends told him, he had heard that schools would never be reopened. It shook Yusuf to bewilderment.

It was the forty-fifth day of the non-stop confinement in their homes. Yusuf was looking out of the window again, in a hope that he would be able to move freely again.

"Yusuf, come here!" His father yelled.

He wore his slippers hastily and rushed to his father's room; his father was lying in the bed. His heart problems had become profound these days.

"Yusuf, if I die soon, you won't be able to bury me." His father remarked.

"Please don't say this, Abbu!" Yusuf said.

"I want to talk to my brothers, sisters, and friends. I want to know about their well-being and I want to meet them!" His father said.

"Conditions would change and everything would return to normal, I am sure and we shall go and meet them soon." Yusuf tried to console his father.

"This is one of the worst conditions, I feel jailed. And, I fear my kids will die of hunger. I don't know what we are paying this price for. Our land has become a living jail; this is perhaps the largest confinement in the world.

Oh God, save us!" His father started weeping.

"How much shall we pay now? I want to save the future of my kids. About fifty-thousand youths have been sacrificed this way. What do they want now? They want to engulf us and eat us, I think." His father said helplessly.

"No one can make us captives, Abbu. Our way is long and enduring, it needs patience to work." Yusuf replied.

"Yusuf, if I am no more, do remember a thing that I am going to tell you. Never give in to the sufferings, and live

your life with dignity.

You could accept hunger and thirst but, never do compromise with your self- respect. Die of a respectful death. Yusuf, you belong to a family where selfless martyrdom has been a tradition for centuries.” His father said.

Yusuf’s eyes brimmed with tears. He said nothing and remained silent as if gesturing an affirmation to his father.

His wife, Zubeda called him from the kitchen. He saw her in tears.

“Why are these tears shedding on your beautiful face, Zubeda?

You promised to stay strong for us.

What happened?” He asked her.

“It has been forty-five days. I fear that every passing day would bring new trouble for our family. My children want to continue their studies. What must I say? What must I do?”

“The can of rice has emptied today. There are no medicines left, and the savings have also finished. We even don’t know how our relatives are managing. I want to meet them.” She demanded.

“Your tears could shatter everybody’s courage, our son could get timid, and Abbu would be more restless. Right now, he needs a tension-free environment. His heart problems are worsening each day. Please hold back your tears, wipe them off, and have faith in God.” Yusuf tried to calm her.

“I miss my parents, lord knows of which condition they are in, and there is nobody to look after them. May God take care of them-” She said.

“My tears are for those innocent children who have been persecuted brutally. The blood of the killed, innocent and

unarmed people would speak for themselves, someday.” She said.

“We shall overcome this helplessness someday, Insha Allah. These tears which they have shed would indeed, turn into bombshells.” He said.

“Out of the window, the gushing cool breeze had touched me, coming from the top of the mountains, bringing with it the message of peace. But, these days, the wind, too watches the bloodbath at every corner. I have seen children wounded with pellet guns. Yesterday, I saw a woman wailing on the death of her husband. It has scarred my heart. I don’t know why all of this is happening.” He said.

“Zubeda, I look in your eyes and I feel safe. You are the strength of our family. If some people with strength like you could gather, we could defeat them!” He said.

Just then, Yusuf’s twelve-year-old son, Faizan stepped in the kitchen, with a long face.

“Ammi, when could I go out and play with my friends?” Faizan asked her.

She embraced her son tightly, and said, “Very soon, Faizan!”

“Go, play with the parrot. See, how beautiful it looks in the cage? It can mimic you, anything you say and would cheer you. Go, play with the bird, my dear.” She said.

“Ammi, aren’t we all like that bird? We can’t go out like the parrot. It can’t fly high in the sky, it can’t sing songs freely. It lives on the mercy of others.” Faizan said.

“But, he will not harm you; he will obey you, Faizan. Come, let me show you.” Yusuf said.

Zubeda, who heard this, cringed a bit inside. “You are right, my dear,” She said.

Next to the cage, the father-son duo was conversing.

“The bird has no wish to come out. He doesn’t know of the freedom. While, I long to fly like Shaheen, the eagle. It flies high, pounces, and then tilts over; it swoops down and then returns.” Faizan said, mimicking the flight of a bird with his hands.

“Now, feed your pet, Faizan, serve him water and ask him to sing a song for you,” Yusuf said.

“No, I don’t want to have it here.” Faizan rapidly tried to open the cage. As he opened it, the bird flew away. It went high in the sky. Both gazed at the soaring flight of the bird, with their heads stooped high.

Suddenly, Yusuf heard his father shouting. Yusuf rushed to attend his father. His father had been sweating profusely. He was panting and puffing out rapidly. He started to gesture with his hand and started to murmur ‘kalmia-e-shahadah’. Before Yusuf could grasp the situation, his father had stopped breathing.

Yusuf started crying loudly, “Abbu, do not leave me, Abbu!” Zubeda came running to the room.

Faizan was sitting on a mat, looking at all of this, from a distance. His eyes started to roll down tears. He looked up; the bird was still flying high in the sky.

“Like that bird set free in the sky, my grandfather’s soul would also be set free now. And, like that bird, he would also sing the songs of freedom in a jolly mood. He would certainly enjoy freedom from the cage.” Little Faizan said while he watched the bird until it disappeared.

A LETTER

SIKAR, RAJASTHAN
September 22, 2019

My dear father,

Probably, this letter won't reach you. Chances are scanty like our freedom these days.

All the communication lines have been restricted in Kashmir. Internet services have been suspended. So, talking to you or anyone has become almost impossible now.

Do you remember when we both used to have a heated debate for which party would rule the central government? Nowadays, the politics of the valley has become pathetic. The people have been segregated widely. There is a blockade everywhere, the opposition leaders have been put under detention. The whole valley has been flooded with armed men and there is a tight curfew. People, including men, women and the old have been confined in their houses.

This is a sudden and strange happening in the valley. I cannot believe that this is happening and I am writing about this to you.

Here, we, the students of Kashmir are appalled by the complete shutdown of the system. We are doubtful if we would be able to complete our studies.

I have seen several students, who had come here to study, being helpless and unable to contact their families, and I am

one of them, father.

Right now, as I am writing this letter to you, the sun is setting down and I sit here alone, at the window of my hostel room. Children are busy playing with their friends in the field outside. Birds are nonetheless, flying and singing in a high-pitch.

I wish a pigeon comes down at the sill of my window and flies away with my letter to you and even brings back your message.

When I finally accepted the reality of the whole valley and the mishappenings that it has started to face, I remembered the story that you narrated once, of the life of the great prophet Muhammad and his companions who were kept in isolation for two years at Shi'b Abi Talib. They were left completely isolated from the rest of the world. They ate leaves and the dry peelings but had never compromised with their self-respect. I still remember you told me that the moral that we get from the life of the great prophet is 'to be patient, always'.

My teachers have been inspirational. They still maintain their gentleness in these times and are helpful to the students. On some occasions, some agitated goons enter our hostel, harassing the students. They ridicule our eating habits and ethnicity, and relocate us forcefully from our rooms. But, it is a relief that our teachers and the college administration have always taken our side.

I am celebrating Eid-ul-Adha without you, perhaps for the first time in my life. The festival reminds me of the sacrifices told by you, of our great-forefather Ibrahim, that he had to part with his wife and a baby Ismail only on the mercy of God. I am passing through the same solitude, the same testing phase without you and I hope that one day we shall stand victorious, and the sweat and emission of our great pain would flow like 'Zam Zam' water.

When I visited Eidgah this time, I was alone in the crowd. The speech of Imam made me learn that when all the wicked powers got united and threw Ibrahim in the pyre, the fire could not burn him because the fire is a making of Lord and his manifestations obey the orders of only Allah. The Lord is indeed generous towards his believers.

Now, it has become more evident to me that Islam, 'the religion of God' teaches its followers to spread their palms before only the lord and if he is wanting us to undergo tests like living in solitude and surviving in abnormal conditions, we must pass his tests without any objection. We would realize that he is the true sustainer and hope for us.

But, it makes me perplexed when I think, "What is our fault?"

Have we done something wrong, Abbu?

We have not snatched the land of others. We have not killed anyone. Neither, we have been violent, nor had we advocated the violence.

Then why, we have been persecuted for decades? I want to look out for the answer. Being not treated well is a distant problem; we are even being handled with the pellet guns. This is horrible.

Why do the goons and the scoundrels cast an unwelcoming sight at our sisters? Just yesterday, a friend of mine showed a pathetic message being forwarded, and the social media has been infested of immoral posts in which some people mockingly, long to purchase a plot in the Kashmir and marry Kashmiri women. What people have downgraded to, I am unable to describe, and this is lamentable.

I witness a lot of demonstrations every day and the police watch the happenings as a mute spectator, even when the mob goes violent. Several incidents of looting of public property and vandalizing also take place often, disrupting

the normal life, but no one opens fire on them for being insane.

Kashmiris export apples, but in turn, we receive bombing. We produce invaluable saffron and export it with its beautiful message of fragrance but, all we get is hatred. We welcome tourists open-heartedly, but in turn, we are abused and sometimes, lynched to our trauma. They cast a sight of suspicion on us and they treat us as terrorists many times.

Maybe, our fault is that we were given a special status. But, now they have even abrogated it. Certainly, we do not need special status. We just need a normal status of peace and a respectful life, where we can express our views freely. I urge that all the powers of Kashmir must be left to the Kashmiris. We don't need anyone. We want to make our land a paradise in the truest sense, where every person could find peace.

You would be a bit relieved to know that several organizations and human rights groups have shown solidarity with the people of Kashmir. They have sent memorandums to the government of India. They stand with us. They have demanded full-fledged communication lines to be reopened for us, security restrictions to be lifted, opposition leaders to be released, and an investigation is to be conducted on alleged human rights violations. We feel hopeful now.

My dear father, once I meet you, I shall never leave our land. I remember that once, you told me that when I was born, there was a disturbance all over the Kashmir. I could not receive medical treatment because of the wide shutdown at that time. And, Abbu, since then I have been witnessing and hearing of fire, blasts, crackdowns, tortures, arrests of the innocent youths, protests, shutdowns, and the perpetual stone-pelting. The young generation has been

deprived of a bright future. We don't know what lies in our future.

I am highly disturbed here. Anyhow, I stand with all of my solidarity with the people of Kashmir. India is the country where Mahatma Gandhi was born, who put non-violence on the maps of humanity.

I want to lead a life full of pride and dignity, a life full of self-respect and fearlessness. I have to fulfill a lot of dreams of mine and yours, Abbu.

I pray to the almighty Allah for your well being. I hope to meet you soon.

Your loving son,

Always and ever with you,

Riyaz Khan.

“O GROOM IN WAITING
H LORD, LET THE
PEACE PREVAIL IN
THE WORLD, MAKE THE
WORLD PROSPER.

Show your miraculous mercy upon us.

You are the most merciful, make our way an easy one.

My son, Javed is getting married today.

In the past two attempts, we have failed miserably.

I seek your help and spread my hands before you.

O Lord, this time we call on you to keep us away from the disappointments.”

Sabira was sitting on a praying mat. Her hands, spread out, were wavering helplessly. Her face became wet with uncontrollable tears.

The sun was about to emerge after a night. The darkness, when people are usually packed in their houses, was slowly being wiped off by the pastels of the new morning. The birds chirped gaily and some soared high in the sky to welcome the advancing day granted by God.

After her namaz-e- fazr, she bowed down in helplessness which seemed to be drawn out from her long-held despair.

Her husband, Abdul Ghani had just returned from the mosque after performing the first prayer of the day. He wore a long grey *Phiran* and a white skull cap.

He entered the room and greeted, "Assalam-o-Alaikum".

His wife unfolded her praying mat. She rushed to the kitchen and put a pan of milk on the stove.

She brought out the tray of hot tea and biscuits for him and sat beside him.

"That auspicious occasion has finally come, which we have waited for long." He said.

"We are fortunate," Said Sabira. Her smile turned fainter, "But, what if... I am fearful ofagain."

"Have faith in God, Sabira. I know that our last two attempts of getting our son married have failed miserably. Those attempts lie in the past. But, what could we have done? The first time when we had started preparations, there was a massive flood across the whole state and even, the normal life was disturbed. We could not have thought of his marriage in all the disruptions around us.

The second time when we had fixed the date, there came a severe crackdown across the city, and for almost a fortnight! We even could not have stepped out of our homes. Don't you remember? " He sighed.

She blurted, "Every time, each time of our lives, things are not under our control. It is our destiny for us, in the end."

"Whatever it is, good or bad, it is granted to us by the almighty," Sabira said.

"We have done whatever we could, we do fulfill our duties, still an unknown fear grips me today. What if something bad happens today, too? ...On our son's marriage day, today." She said.

"Can we fight our luck?" He said.

"My only desire is to see the beautiful face of my daughter-in-law here, to come to our home finally. Even if I were to

die the very next day, I shall have no regrets.” She murmured.

He agreed, “Javed is our son, a simple boy. I have not watched even a frown or grimace touch his face.”

“I love him, my Javed.”

“But, no one can understand my pain, the pain of a father whose son is in his thirties, and still unmarried.” He whispered.

Suddenly, his mobile rang.

Mr. Khan, Javed’s to-be-father-in-law was on the other side of the phone. “Assalam-o-Alaikum!”

“Walaikum Asslam!”

“So, are preparations ready?”

“Yes, indeed, almost everything is ready.”

“We expect to reach there before 10.00 AM.”

“Okay, everything is good. Please, make sure to reach the venue on time. I think it will not take more than one hour to reach here, right?” Mr. Khan said.

“Yes, don’t worry.” He reassured.

As he hung the phone, he yelled to everyone around him, asking all the family members and relatives to get ready soon. After all, it was the most-awaited event for them. Everybody started to hurry.

Javed, the bridegroom sat impatiently on the towed chair, in his dressing room.

The beautician started to powder for the final touch.

Javed wore a sherwani laced with intricate borders and a churidar pajama.

He looked at the Karakuli Topi on the table in front of him. He looked in the mirror and smiled.

“My dear Sara, the day has finally arrived. I impatiently wait to see you today. I have been counting each passing day for months, now I am counting the hours left.” He mumbled and lost himself in memories.

He recollected their college-days when they had just seeded their plant of love. They had promised to live and die with each other.

He had never cursed his destiny in the past when his marriage had to be halted for two times. He was sure that one day, he would be with her no matter what may befall.

Suddenly, he heard a knock on his door.

“Brother, get ready. Everyone is waiting for you. We must reach the venue at the earliest.” His sister, Wahida shouted. She looked scintillating in her new dress. She wore a pair of ocean-blue Sharara-Kurti, pebbled with small crystal stones.

“Yes! I am almost ready.” He replied.

He put on the shiny shoes that he had ordered from abroad.

When he came out of his room, his brothers and relatives started to garland him. His mother came forward and put her hand on his head. She started to babble with prayers. Her eyes were moist, looking at him.

“Mother, oh, please do not cry today. Today is an auspicious day.” Javed gushed.

“No, my son. The tears are also auspicious when they are shed out of happiness. And, the tears in a mother’s eyes for the well-being of her son, are always auspicious.” She said.

All of them started to board the bus. Women started to sing the merry songs of auspiciousness, and the children were frolicking in their brand-new dresses.

His father looked a bit restless. He had a *tasbeeh* in his hand and was reciting the holy name of God.

His mother would look at the sky often, as if she was directly asking God to keep all the hardships away, by seeing him in his eyes.

Javed was sitting contently, with his friends in a maroon Bolero car. His car was led by a caravan of other four vehicles.

This time, they were determined and silent. They were neither clapping nor singing nor dancing.

Javed looked upon the lush green fields running past his car. They were set off to Balhama, a small village, fifty kilometers away.

A cool breeze and blooming flowers welcomed them on their way.

His father took his phone out of his pocket. He wanted to inform the Khans that they had departed from their home and were heading towards the venue.

His call was unable to connect them due to the recently broken network. He tried with several attempts but, to the vain. He asked his friends around him to dial the Khans; they were also unable to connect with them.

“It happens, sometimes. Do not worry. Within minutes, the connections would start working again.” His friends tried to pacify him.

The bus started to vroom towards the village, where his to-be-in laws must have been waiting to welcome them. The venue must have been bustling with anticipation, welcoming, and delicacies.

All the passengers were silent in anticipation. They were even prepared to walk for one kilometer, on the rough road connecting the highway to the village.

The bus was about to take a turn. People became silent. It was one of the infamous spots approaching their way. Abdul

started to fumble with his *tasbeeh* , fervently. His heart was filled with many apprehensions and his friends regularly assured him.

On the next crossroad post, when he spotted a heavy deployment of the army, he stood aghast.

They had barricaded the way. Black commandos took their positions with loaded guns in their hands. They were signaling the vehicles to move back.

One army man waved in front of their bus. The driver had to halt. Abdul got off the bus along with his friends.

“Sir, it is a simple marriage, and we have to reach the village before ten, somehow. We are not here to harm anyone, sir, please allow us to go.” One of his friends said.

“Sir, my son is to get married today; we had to postpone his marriage two times before, due to some mishappenings.” Abdul urged.

“Sir, please allow us, the groom’s old parents would be devastated if the marriage is postponed again.” His other friend said.

Everyone started pleading to them.

“No, not at all. We have strict orders to return all the vehicles from this route, today. It would be good and safe for all of you to return as soon as possible.” One of the armed men said.

“A tight curfew has been imposed. All the communication lines have been blocked and the internet services have been suspended. People have been confined in their homes and you are thinking of the marriage.” Another armed man rebuked them.

Everyone had to give in to their barricades.

Javed on seeing the sudden commotion got off his car. Everyone had crowded outside the bus.

His father was silently reciting the holy name of God.

“What happened? Why cannot we go ahead?” Javed asked.

“Who has stopped the bus?” He started to yell.

He looked at the long faces of his relatives. His friend fumed, “Everything is thorny here, even the roads.”

He looked up. The leaves brushed with the gloomy air and fell lifelessly from the trees.

Everyone was surrounded by a serious gloom. Women had stopped singing and the aloof children were busy playing. They were unaware of the mishappening that had just taken place.

Javed smiled faintly and concealed his burgeoning emotions.

He said, “Let us return.”

He continued after a long pause, “It is of no use to argue with the military.”

“They could have stopped me but they cannot prevent my long-held desire; they can send me back but my ambition won’t retreat. Whatever the conditions could be, I would have to look for a glimmer of light, even at a night.” He murmured.

The driver turned back the bus. Everyone sat back into their seats silently.

Javed took off the garland around his neck and put it neatly into his bag. He thought, “I will save this garland, it is special to me. I know, I’ll wear it again some other day, very soon.”

THE MAN IN BOOTS

Saitan Singh had returned on duty after a long break of two months. He had just come back from spending a happy vacation with his family in Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan.

He started recollecting his carefree celebrations and the trips with his friends.

They had celebrated, walked with a springing zeal and sang, and danced along. There was no interference by the police and some helpful people even provided them with refreshments.

Now he sat alone on the bank of the Jhelum River, holding a large gun in his hands. He rested the gun in his left hand and the right hand was ever-ready on the trigger of the gun.

He sat on the bunker, highly alert. Clad in heavy black boots, he was fully equipped with his military uniform. It was usual for him to have a grave face, even after a week he had returned from home.

He could hear just the rustling of leaves around him. There was no rush, no traffic jams, and no processions. Just a few people and children could be sighted.

He was well aware of his duties and held a firm vigilance. His fingers were always set on the trigger, prepared for any disruption that may befall. For the security of the place and its people, he stood ready with his gun, solemn to kill anyone who seemed threatening.

He saw some regular faces walking by his post, which he saw almost every day. Some bid him 'Salaam' while some smiled back at him.

There are even some days when the road became eerily silent with no people in sight. On these days, there were not even school children spotted. It was horrible for Saitan and the silence almost shrieked to him.

Saitan Singh was again lost in his sweet memories. The memories of his home reverberated in his mind and soul. But, his duty reverberated more like a pendulum, for him. He unrumpled his uniform again and stood alert with the heavy gun in his hands.

"Good morning, sir!"

A soft voice suddenly roused him. It was of a twelve-year-old child clad in a white Kurta and Pajama. He was innocently smiling at him.

Saitan Singh immediately recognized him.

"Oh! Ashraf! How are you?"

"I am very fine sir. How are you and your family?"

"Everything is well and good."

"You see, we are in jail. We are not allowed to come out of our homes, to go to school, and even to admit our people to the hospital during an emergency.

Still, I would say that we are very fine by the grace of the almighty Allah."

The armed man could not say anything. He smiled faintly.

Ashraf came forward and extended a flower to his friend.

Saitan Singh calmly accepted this token of peace with a grateful smile.

"This flower conveys a message from all the Kashmiris, to the whole world!" The boy said.

“Indeed, my little boy.” He said.

“We know that the valley is great and everything that will happen here will be great.

But, some people fear that something worse is happening for the Kashmiris.

This would push the whole valley to a disaster. They have already started to collect ration for the kitchen and money for the rainy days.” The boy said.

Changing the course of the conversation, Saitan said, “Oh Ashraf, I have brought you sweets from Rajasthan! Come, have a bite.”

“Oh sweets from Rajasthan, I love them!

You are a good friend of mine, Saitan. You are a nice person.

Err... But, I fear your gun.” The boy said.

“No, you need not fear me, Ashraf.

This gun is for the bad people who incite hatred, kill people, loot people or harass them for no cause.”

After a long pause, Ashraf asked, “Would you teach me how to handle the gun? I want to fight against the enemies of peace.”

Saitan Singh cackled with loud laughter.

“No, guns are not made for children. You must concentrate on your studies, make yourself efficient and help your parents. Obey and respect them, they have done a lot for you.”

“Then why do you have a gun in your hand?”

“Who do you want to fight?” Ashraf asked.

Saitan Singh just smiled, saying nothing.

“I am left with my mother as my only family. My father and my brother were killed in an encounter, two years ago. My

mother tells me that I was a little kid back then.” The boy said.

“Oh, who were they?”

“I asked my mother but she did not tell me. She says, “I shall tell you when you grow up. For now, you must study, work hard, and become a fully-grown man, so that you can avenge the murder of your father and brother.” The boy said.

“Would you take the arms in your hands to take the revenge?” Saitan Singh asked.

The boy’s eyes spoke of bundled-up anger.

He turned red and said in a muffled voice, “No, I have to study and work hard as my mother has told me to. I want to be obedient to my mother. She loves me unconditionally.” The boy said.

“Very Good, son!” Saitan Singh said.

Suddenly, it struck Ashraf that he had to buy medicines for his ailing mother.

“Oh I have to reach home soon; else, my mother would get worried. She has been suffering from fever for many days,” Saying this he rushed away.

Many days passed by, but Saitan could not see Ashraf come that way. He missed talking to the little boy.

His long absence made Saitan Singh worried.

It was just then when he saw an old man. It was the same man that Ashraf had once pointed to, saying that the man stayed in his neighborhood.

“Hey, have you seen Ashraf recently?”

“How is he these days?”

“Has he been well?” Saitan Singh asked.

“Oh, Ashraf? No, no. He is not well. A few days back, he was playing with his friends in front of his house, when suddenly a commotion started. People were rallying and the army tried to disperse them. Soon the situation got out of control and in no time, a heavy firing started. During this, a pellet hit his left leg. He is now, at bedrest at his home and the doctors have suggested him complete rest for one month.” He said.

Saitan Singh was shocked, listening to the news. The innocent face of the boy started revolving in his mind. He wanted to see Ashraf.

He thought, “Should I visit Ashraf?”

He thought deeply about all the consequences and nooks of the situation.

After deep consideration, he decided not to go there.

“But I adore this little boy.” thought Saitan.

“Will you please give this box of sweets to Ashraf? He loves to eat Rajasthani sweets.” Saitan Singh said to the old man.

“Sure, I will give your box with your sentiments, to him.” The man said.

A few days later, Saitan was on his regular duty in the bunker. Fully armored with his military gear, he stood holding the machine gun in his hand. He felt safe in his little cabin made of

stacked packets of the sand. An uncanny silence prevailed around him as he casually peeped above his gun’s barrel.

“Good morning, Uncle!”

It was Ashraf standing there, with his ever-bright smile. He had a bunch of flowers in his hand.

He looked weak. He came forward and offered the flowers to Saitan.

“Oh, Ashraf! I was very worried about you.”

“How are you now?”

“What happened to you?” Saitan started blabbering.

“I am fine by the grace of the almighty Allah.”

“I was injured and had a deep wound in my left leg. They wanted to kill me as they have killed my father and brother. God saved me so that I could avenge the murder of them.” Ashraf said.

“You are smart and very young, yet you always speak about fighting and revenging.” Saitan Singh said.

“If you were in my shoes, you would not have said———.”

“What do you expect from a child like me who has lost his father and brother to the atrocities of this place?” The boy said.

It was again, one of the times when Ashraf was not in sight of Saitan. Saitan Singh missed the little boy.

Saitan had a son, Ravi, and he resembled Ashraf strikingly. Whenever he saw Ashraf he used to get a sense of satisfaction, as if he was watching his son.

Saitan could not simply visit Ashraf’s home and ask about his wellness.

A few days later, he was standing on his usual duty.

It was blowing cold and black clouds started growing in the sky.

Saitan Singh was lost aloof in the memories. Just yesterday, he had dialed up at his home, it was a festive season in his village and everybody back at his home was in a cheerful mood. Streets and the highways bustled with pilgrims’ journeys. Everybody seemed to sing and dance, celebrating the festive season. All of this made Saitan homesick for his place.

Suddenly, he observed a group of people walking in his direction. He found himself back in his duty; he stood highly alert in his little cabin. He gripped his gun tightly.

He realized that it was a burial procession moving towards the graveyard.

“Somebody must have died.” He thought.

He saw just a few people in the procession. They chanted in a low voice, “Kalmia-e-shahadah! La ilaha illallah!”

When the procession came closer, he saw a little boy accompanying the procession. He immediately recognized him.

Ashraf was wearing a grey Pathani suit and a white skull cap.

Saitan Singh’s heart began to beat loudly. When Ashraf passed by his post, they had eye contact. Ashraf’s eyes were full of tears. He came directly in front of the bunker and said boldly, “My mother died today and the only reason that she could not get timely treatment was the heavy deployment!”

Wiping away his tears, he turned grave, “She has left me alone in this world. Now, I shall be living only on the mercy of Allah.”

Ashraf turned back and dutifully joined the procession for his mother.

Saitan Singh stood up in reverence to the departed soul and in surmising remorse. He gazed at Ashraf until he disappeared.

Tears trickled down Saitan’s face, perhaps for the first time in his life.

**“ LET ME FLY T HAS
BEEN A LONG TIME
SINCE I WENT TO
SCHOOL, ABBA.”**

“I am worried about my exams and I don’t know what lies in my future now.” Faisal tugged at his father’s arm. His throat started to choke.

“The mist would disappear soon, my son. Don’t worry, everything will come back to normal and you will go to your school like you used to,” His father comforted him.

“We are helpless and we can do nothing as of right now, can we?” His father said.

However, he doubted if the conditions would change and if his son would be able to go back to school. He could not think straight. His child’s future seemed to be incoherent; he did not know what to do. He only knew that at this point, the only duty that he could keep up with was to keep his son’s confidence high. He thought, “Else, this could lead my son to fall back in his grades when he rejoins school.”

“I want to continue studying with my friends. My teachers have always inspired me to never give up.”

“And, Abba, what about my exam? Without their help, I cannot crack a tough exam like NEET.” Faisal babbled desperately.

“But you are not alone in this misery, Faisal. Look around, all the students of the valley are passing through the same situation, so you don’t need to worry.” His father tried to cool him down.

"I can't wait, anymore. I have decided to go to a place every night to study.

"I seek a place where nothing must come between books and the students. I seek to have a place where my teachers are available forever." Faisal said.

"I shall find a place where the school is open throughout the year and there are no demonstrations, strikes, or shutdowns, firings or any stone-pelting to disturb the students," Faisal yelled.

"No, Faisal! How can you even think of going out in the dark of the night?"

"And, you know that a strict curfew has been imposed in the city." His father rebuked him.

"I need guidance from my teachers and would need to discuss topics with my classmates. I can't do that without the internet. I need to 'Google' every ten minutes. Do you know how long would it take for the internet to restore?" He said.

"Faisal, I understand you. I assure that everything would come back to normal soon, and you would be able to 'Google' again." His father said.

After a long pause of silence, His father suggested Faisal to leave home. He told him that he would ask his brother who lived in another state if he could stay with them.

"Faisal would find a peaceful place to study," He thought.

Faisal stopped arguing.

He began to think, "How could I leave my home and family when everyone is suffering badly?"

"How could I enjoy peace and luxuries, when my parents are denied of them?"

"How could I enjoy the freedom when my family is still living under the shadow of guns?"

Faisal went silently into his room. He heaved in a chair and looked at his notes. The sheets began to rustle beneath his hands, thoughtlessly. He did not want to be even slight trouble for his family; he knew of what difficulties his parents were going through. His father was a shopkeeper. He did not have a big shop. And, frequent shutdowns in the city had already broken down the economy of the nation and his father's shop.

Suddenly, he heard a knock on his door. It was Rehan, his friend standing there. He smiled and they embraced each other.

"How are your studies going?" Rehan asked.

"Not good. I fear that this time, I would fail. The air has been polluted by the smoke of guns, trucks and the never-ending conflict. The days have become silent as schools are shut nowadays, and the nights seem to be noisy as if the monsters are breaking havoc." He said.

"Yes, yes, you have correctly explained that," Rehan said, adjusting his spectacles on his nose.

"I have been waiting for long, for the things to return to the normal. Our studies can prosper only in a peaceful environment. How long would this unrest continue? My dream for the NEET exam has already been shattered. My parents do not hope for me.

If the conditions remain the same for a few more months, the students' dreams would completely be crushed." Rehan said.

"I remember the last year when I had worked hard and secured the first rank in my exams. My parents and teachers have a lot of hopes. But, this time I have yet to start my studies." Faisal said, despaired.

"How can we get out of this trouble?" Rehan asked.

"I have thought of a plan. We should mobilize all the students who have been suffering like us. We can march for a rally to make everyone aware, and in fact, to make those armed men aware of how powerful we are." He said.

"Yeah, it is a good idea. Someone would listen to our misery when we put up our rally on the roads, and we shall find a way to come out of this." Rehan said.

"But, what would be written on our placards of protest?" Rehan asked.

"It will be, "We want to study, and we want peaceful places to study."" He said.

"Let us fly, Let us come out of the detentions.

Let us talk on our phones again and use the internet, as before.

No inhibitions, ever again.

Don't spoil our future, We are the future of our nation." He continued.

"Great, Faisal, and we live in the 21st century, not in the 19th with no technology."

"And, if there is no peace, there will be no progress. You must add this too." Rehan said.

"Yes that's a fine idea; we should start convincing the students from today itself," Faisal said.

"Yes, from today." Rehan declared and they both came out of the home.

Faisal and Rehan appealed to the students to come out en masse. Many students took their call-out seriously and a large number of students joined them for the plan. It was unexpected for Faisal that he could gather such big participation. He was hopeful now. They started the preparations. They held their plans as well-kept secrets, and

even their parents could not have a slight idea of what they intended to do.

They distributed the tasks between themselves. Some wrote on the placards. Another group was given the responsibility to gather the students at the right time. Everyone practiced shouting with the full energy on the D-day.

Faisal had prepared a full-fledged letter to hand over to the authorities. It stated all the ongoing concerns for the students. In his letter, he asked for the restoration of internet services, as it was critical for the students' academics. He expressed that if the essential services were not restored, the students would start lagging behind the students of the rest of the country.

It was decided to organize the rally on the coming Sunday.

On Saturday, Faisal, Rehan, and their friends gathered to finalize the program for the next day. The heap of placards stood lying before them, inscribed with what they all had written passionately.

Faisal was sure that their voices would be heard and they would be able to restore their studies. "Our schools would reopen, our miserable days would be no more and there would be a new era for us to prosper." Faisal was lost in his thoughts.

His father entered his room. He was content of the fact that Faisal had given up the habit of complaining now and then.

"What are you doing, my dear? You have started to concentrate on your studies, that is very good," He said.

Faisal and Rehan stood froze. The heap of placards was spread in front of them. His father took notice of the heap lying there.

"What are these sheets? What is written on them?"

Faisal and Rehan were at a loss of words.

“Oh Abba, we.... want to show the authorities...” Faisal stammered.

“We want to march out on a rally for restoring the normalcy in the valley. We want to have an education-friendly environment.” Faisal said.

“Yes, we are sure that the authorities would act upon our demands,” Rehan said.

“Oh, but you should have consulted me before planning all of this.” His father said.

“We did not want to trouble you. Plus, we thought that you would not permit us. We wanted the rally anyhow; it is high time, Uncle.” Rehan said.

“But dear, don’t you know that you cannot organize a rally even if it is in favor of thousands of students?” His father said.

“Why?” Faisal demanded.

“You don’t know that they would arrest you, children; they would put you behind the bars for disturbing the peace.” His father said.

“But, peace has already been disturbed by them.” Faisal retorted.

He continued, “And, we are not going to harm anyone. We hope that they would listen to our misery and we would get what we want, Abba.” Faisal said.

His father frowned. “No, you must call off your plans. It is not in favor of anyone. The plan would lead all of us in big trouble. You don’t know that at this moment, you can’t come out on the roads, even for a pious, religious cause.” His father said.

“But, it is our democratic right!” Faisal said.

“Shut up, Faisal. We have no rights. You must try to understand that demands should be raised where there is

someone to listen to them. There is nobody here to listen to you.” His father said.

“What do we do now?” Rehan said.

“Burn these placards, yes, it is better to burn all of them.” His father said desperately.

“We wanted to bring peace through these placards,” Faisal said.

“You are rather going to bring misery to all of us, with these sheets!” His father shouted.

He got furious and started to collect all the placards. He rushed holding the pile of sheets, to the yard in front of their home. He sprinkled some drops of kerosene over the placards and set them ablaze.

Faisal and Rehan stood there helplessly. They saw their placards turning to thick, black smoke.

The boys looked at the charred placards which indistinctly said, “—- want peace Let’s fly ——— Restore internet, ———— the future of our country.

——- 21st century——-”

Within no time, their placards and hopes turned into a mere heap of ash.

Their eyes were gleaming with the fearless fire that had burned their aspirations.

His father’s eyes brimmed of tears. He felt utterly despaired. Neither could he do anything to ease the problems of his son nor could he allow him to demand his rights.

AND THE SOUL WOKE UP A LARGE CROWD SWARMED IN FRONT OF ANNAN'S OFFICE.

Annan worked as the principal secretary in the Ministry of Women and Child Welfare.

He was well-known for his helpful nature and was respected, and adored by all. Anyone who had come to him seeking help, never went away empty-handed. He always assured that their work was done without a hitch.

People from all over the state used to visit him to share their ordeals.

Annan would listen to them attentively, especially to those whose voices were stifled helplessly by the authority. He used to propagate, "It's the worst crime to stop people from raising their voices for something that they rightfully deserve."

It was a regular day at his office. The doors clicked open and shut frequently.

A woman and her husband entered the office.

She bade a *pranam* to Annan.

The woman was wearing a shabby, old sari and the man was clad in a long kameez and dhoti with a soiled scarf tucked around his neck.

They started narrating their misery, right away.

"No, please, be seated first, make yourselves comfortable and then, proceed with whatever you want to say," Annan

prompted.

They were surprised by the Annan's gesture; he was an officer of high rank.

They felt fortunate by this unexpected welcome and almost for a moment, they had forgotten their miseries.

"Sir, I am Ramaswami and she is my wife Urmila. We have come from Rathnapuram town. There, we are often harassed by some people. They are influential people. They just break in our homes without our assent, and rob us, molesting our sanctity at the gunpoint. They threaten our lives if we recourse to the police's help. And, on the other side, the police, instead of providing us safety, thrashes us and orders to be silent."

"Sir, we have been humiliated. Nobody would listen to us. Our dignity and safety dangle with risks."

Annan listened to them conscientiously.

"Have you been suffering for long?"

"This has been going on since long." They answered.

"Who are these 'influential people'?"

"He is Rajan, the son of a police officer."

"They are powerful people. They are in connection with the high-ranked officers and politicians. Once, Rama tried to approach the police for help, they thrashed him black and blue, and that too in the broad daylight. Even our relatives could not register an FIR against them." Urmila said.

"This is a great injustice to silence people, and with what? With their fleeting powers!

We all live in a democratic country where every person has a right to speak. If we silence them forcibly, it ceases to be a democratic country." Annan said, raising his voice.

"Sir, please help us. We would be highly indebted to you."
The man said.

"I would surely do what I could."

"We want to live with dignity and our self-respect. We want the rule of law to work.

We want that all those perpetrators should be booked and severe punishment must be given to them. This would restore the confidence of the common people, in our government." The man said.

"Rightly said, if our confidence in the system shatters, it would lead to a situation similar to an epidemic."

"The foundations of our democracy would collapse," Annan said.

Annan became restless after listening to them. The anger made his face red.

He pulled out his mobile phone out of his pocket.

Annan asked the couple to wait outside his office for a while.

He fervently started to dial a number. He called the District Superintendent of the police.

After having a heated discussion, he composed back his calm demeanor.

Annan called for the next candidate in the long queue.

"What can I do for you?" He asked in his consistent, respectful manner.

Annan shone like an 'Epitome of Justice' for the people who came appealing to him.

He believed, "If justice does not prevail, it would lead to anarchy reigning the nation.

If the voices are suppressed for long, people would take up the system in their own hands.

The weaker section of the society would continue to suffer and powerful ones would continue to walk free. This way, people would lose confidence in our values and strength of the nation.”

A man conducting the queue shouted, “Kishor, please come in.”

“Sir, this is Kishor from Rathnapuram town.”

The man called Ramaswami and his wife too, who were waiting outside.

“The whole of Rathnapuram has been suffering under the grip of goons, and people are unable to speak against them.”

“And on the top of it, the police officers at your place, threaten them if they try to report to the police,” Annan said.

The officer mumbled clumsily, “Sorry...I am very sorry sir.”

“I want this issue to be resolved very soon. I give you a week’s notice.”

“To enslave people at the gunpoint is a cruel crime against humanity. People like you, try to tarnish the symbol of democracy and the valuable principles ingrained in the law.”

“We are well-known all over the world for preserving democratic values in such a diversified nation.”

“It is foremostly required that everyone is free to express his or her views. And, even if the views do not favor you, you must think for the larger good.”

“Yes Sir, I’ll do whatever I could do from my end.” Saying this, the police officer started to come out of the cabin.

“Now, go back to your village and start registering the FIR against those people.”

“And, do not worry. I’ll handle everything else.” Annan confirmed.

The old couple knew no bounds to their joy as their long-pending wish had been fulfilled.

“He is not a man but an angel, God has sent him down for helping the people like us.” The woman said.

It was August. He was heartbroken this time of the year.

He was despaired to see what was happening in the Kashmir. The basic, democratic rights of the masses had been snatched. People were being forced to live under a curfew and were not able to talk to anyone outside their city.

All political leaders had been put under house arrest. With schools and hospitals’ gates shut, the common man had been left solely on the mercy of God.

The people were completely cut off from their dear ones and relatives. It seemed as if the whole valley had become a prison for the inhabitants.

The place called ‘The Paradise on Earth’ had indeed become the Netherworld.

The voices of the people were stifled without any accountability. No reporters were allowed access to the streets’ happenings and no political groups were allowed to reach out. People were being sent back from the airport itself.

Annan was not able to sleep well for nights. His wife noticed his restlessness, and asked, “What happened? You do not look well.”

“I have dedicated my life to advocating freedom of speech.” He said.

“Is it alright to enslave people at the gunpoint?”

“Has humanity died?”

“Don’t they have a tad bit of consciousness left in them?” He asked.

“The poor children, women, the old are confined in their houses.

“They are living beings!”

“And for being the largest democracy, we must cite an example of the total freedom, dignity, and self-respect for a citizen.”

“But, why are you so serious? I am sure that everything would soon come back to normalcy.” His wife said.

“I can’t tolerate this blatant injustice. I would not remain silent. When I think about the poor children, old and women being lodged like cattle in their homes, I... I want to cry out loud.” Annan quivered.

“But, I am only a government servant, bound by a lot of restrictions, said and unsaid ones. I can’t oppose the government’s decisions and policies when I am working for them.” He said.

“So, what will you do?” She asked.

“I would quit my job so that I can freely raise my voice against this injustice, without any obligations.”

“Later, even if a Kashmiri asks me that what I had done for them, I would be able to say, “I was with you entirely, I did raise my voice for you, and I stood against the injustice that you suffered.

I did it at the cost of my full-fledged, high-ranked job.”.” He said.

His wife remained silent. She knew that her husband was a determined person, and it was nearly impossible preventing him to go by his decision.

The next day, Annan’s friends and well-wishers gathered at his home.

They were perplexed by this decision of him and bombarded him with questions.

“Do you know what ‘IAS’ means for your parents?”

“And, why do you want to quit this job?” His best friend, Rakesh asked.

“My inner voice blames me for not showing solidarity with my people, those people who live in our country. They need us to be their voices. If I protest along with them, what is wrong in it?” He replied.

“You can protest even while working as a government official.” Shashi, his assistant said.

“Is it not a crime to work with the government and criticize them as well? Wouldn’t I be a hypocrite?” He said.

“Annan, you can’t solve their problems even if you resign and start protesting along with them.” Ramanujam, one of his colleagues added.

“I know that my resignation will not solve their problems. But I will be content working for a single motive. I would be able to stand with my head held high, without any guilt.” He said.

“Don’t you care for your family? You have no house or property of your own. How would you fulfill the dreams and necessities of your family?” Rakesh said.

“I am confident, Rakesh. Do not worry about me. If I could ace a competition like that of the IAS, I am sure that I could earn my bread and butter somehow.”

“I shall not allow anyone to dissuade me from speaking against the oppression in our country,” Annan affirmed.

“After some time, people would forget your good deeds when everything returns to the normal.” His neighbor said.

“To be honest, I do not care. I am taking this step not to be popular. I am doing this for myself. Self-satisfaction is what I

require the most.

I am quite hopeful that 'generations to come' would regard my decision as a positive one. I urge the young generation to come out, and defend the safety and security of the people, especially of the oppressed.

This is a single, collective country and even if a single person is persecuted, the whole country must feel the pain." He said.

"People could call you anti-national, don't you think?" Swami asked.

"I believe from the core of my heart, that to speak on behalf of oppressed people is our prime duty. I am well aware of the fact that when a person raises a voice against the system, he or she may face a lot of dangers. I know that my way is not a bed of roses. But even, roses have thorns. And, I am ready to face all the challenges that come on my way. I do have a premonition of a tough battle ahead." He replied.

His friends could not convince him. The day was almost setting into the evening, with all the discussions of what to do and what not to do.

His wife served them warm tea with some savory samosas.

The following day, he got up early in the morning and hopped out for a light walk.

His wife served him breakfast later in the morning while he scrolled up and down the newspaper.

He felt contented when he started typing his resignation letter. He felt neither wobbly nor did his fingers shiver.

He went to the office beaming with a confident smile and submitted the resignation letter to the authorities. He shook hands, completed the formalities and left the office.

He felt light today as he had finally started his journey to speak against the unjust system of the nation.

When he came out of the office, a group of people was waiting for him.

The well-wishers applauded Mr. Annan, the Ex- IAS Officer. He felt encouraged by their words and their unconditionally warm responses.

“May we be free from the clutches that prevent us to speak for ourselves and the deprived people of our country.”

“Our country, our constitution, and the core of the social fabric of our nation are in a danger.”

“Unlimited power in some hands has made those people blind and they do not care about the sentiments of the common people.”

“Come, let us rise and be a voice for our nation, which is an indomitably united one.” He said.

This day seemed like the beginning of a new morning and as if a long-forlorn bird had been set free.

He waved his hand addressing them.

He slowly walked to the bus stop. A bus stopped at the station. He boarded the crowded, common bus and waved them good-bye.